

December 7, 2008  
The Federated Church of Hyannis  
The Reverend Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor

**A WAY PREPARED**  
**Mark 1:1-8**

Earlier this year we entered into conversation with our builder. We went over the goals and discussed the scope of the work. We delineated the details of construction and explored various options and contingencies. But one thing was clear and non-negotiable. The way over to Fellowship Hall had to be open on December 1<sup>st</sup> to begin the preparations for the Christmas Commons.

But Monday of this week I arrived to discover that the door was still nailed shut. I talked to the foreman and reminded him of the date and our need for the hallway and the agreement we had which we reiterated several times during the past few weeks. He in turn recited a litany of troubles they were facing. Sheetrock had not been hung and the plasterer could not begin his work until then. Some wires were bare and some switches needed to be installed and some of the lights that were installed were incorrect.

There would not be time to install the handrails in the hallway. And worse, there had been some miss-measuring at some point and a section of concrete wall had to be jack hammered out. He estimated that the worker would have to work 24 hours a day to get it done in time. And then there was the pipe in the hallway that burst and the repair to the wall that was necessary and some issues with the furnace.

We engaged in a lively exchange. I reminded him of the agreement and the need for the walk way. He recalled the litany of troubles. I reminded him of the Women's Fellowship closet in the hallway. He mentioned something about Thursday as a best case scenario, but more likely next Wednesday. I mentioned something about needing the Christmas Commons to be a success so they could get paid. He countered with woes about working with subcontractors. Trying to intimidate him I muttered something about Betsy Hendricks. He countered with a listing of insurance liability and jail time if they opened the way and something happens and alluded to problems with approval by the Fire Marshall.

I later learned that others were involved in similar conversations before and after my conversation. The man who writes the checks had already sternly warned them of the need for immediate completion only to see that buck passed to someone else. Later the forementioned Betsy informed the workers that if the way was not ready in time, all these workers would be standing out in front of the church holding wreathes to sell to passersby. When they realized she was not joking they quickened the pace of work considerably. I may have embellished that story just a little.

What would happen if the way was not open? People would have to walk around the block or cut through the cemetery and through the basement door. Mostly likely they would not take any way to get there. I honestly did not sleep well Monday night. But lo and behold, on Tuesday afternoon the builder arrived at my office door. The way, he announced, will be open. It took a lot of very hard work, a lot of cooperation, and a lot of determination, but the way would be open and it was.

Because the way was prepared, our life became manageable and the Christmas Commons was a great success and we are deeply grateful to the builder and all those who worked so hard to prepare the way for us. Yet for all we have done and for all the workers have done, it pales in comparison to the way that God has prepared for us beginning with Abraham up to the time John began his ministry and the centuries since.

Yet as we observe Christmas time, John the Baptist is largely kept out of it. It is mostly just in church and then on a fairly limited basis we hear anything about John and the Way he opened. Here is a man who smelled like a camel and at various times in society would be locked away or laughed at or pelted with stones for preparing the Way for the savior as he did.

It is like the man who thought he was John the Baptist and was disturbing the neighborhood. For public safety, he was committed. He was put in a room with another man also committed for psychiatric observation, and immediately began saying, "I am John the Baptist! Jesus Christ has sent me!" The other guy looked at him and declared, "I did not!" When you consider the story just as it is told, there is something so odd and unlikely about his journey away from society into the wilderness and the crowds who followed him out there and the message he proclaimed.

This gospel lesson teaches us that some of the people who prepare the Way are just down right weird people. John qualified for that. Here he came wearing camel's hair and had locust on his breath. God often uses the strangest people. I remember my high school Sunday School teacher. He considered himself an inventor. One time he invited me over to his home to see some of his inventions.

There he showed me a device for your car that combined bottles and tubes and clamps and glasses so that men could mix martini's in their car to drink on the way home from work. Shortly after that he was asked to stop teaching Sunday school. But somehow even the lessons he taught connected. A lot of kids came to the class of this eccentric teacher. It was like what was said of John, "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him," except that John evidently was not a drinker.

John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus the Messiah. John was the messenger described in the Old Testament book of Malachi. "I will send my messenger to prepare the way for me." John the Baptist was that messenger sent by God to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah.

Advent is a season of preparation. As we go about our preparation we need to be mindful of the preparation God has already given us in Christ. It reminds me of the listing which occasionally occurs in the newspaper of unclaimed property. It might have been from an estate or from an account that was closed or any number of things. I always wondered how people could be unaware of what has been left to them.

We do have an inheritance given us. We don't have to go through some Google search to find it. It is right here. It is before us. Preparations have been made. The Way has been opened. The pathway is clear. God's word has been delivered to prophets and apostles before us. It has been passed along by parents and preachers and teachers. It is written in the book sitting in the book rack before you. "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

One reason John the Baptist may not be so popular is that he preached a baptism of repentance. I know that many of us feel uncomfortable with the word "repent." It is a word that has sometimes been used to merely scold

people, not help them. To repent literally means to turn around, to turn away from where we have been going and head our life in a new way.

A Presbyterian pastor from Iowa by the name of Samuel Massey told of a time he visited Washington, DC, to see the sights. As he toured, he noticed all the people who were begging for handouts and those who were talking with imaginary friends. He said that he ignored the human carnage around him. As he walked, he used a map, but the quadrants of the city confused him. Certain that he was headed for a particular museum he began to stride boldly in the wrong direction.

He became aware of a very short black man beside him, speaking to him. The passing traffic deafened Massey so he could not hear what this man was saying, but he decided it would not be something that he wanted to hear, so he picked up his pace. Soon, however, they reached a busy street corner and had to stop. At that moment, the man stepped in front of him and put his hand on Massey's arm. At the point he had no choice. He had to hear what this man had to say while attempting to protect his wallet at the same time. Massey bent down toward the man – he was sure the aggravation showed on his face.

“Young man,” he said to Massey, “I don't know where you are going, but I can assure you that this is the wrong way. You are headed into the wrong part of Washington and putting your life at risk. Turn around now and go back to where you came from.” That is what it means to repent. He changed directions for his safety, for his salvation. Repent. Turn around. Head in the direction prepared for you.

In ancient days when an Oriental king planned to visit a distant part of his kingdom he sent a messenger ahead to announce the coming visit. The messenger's job was to tell the inhabitants to prepare the way for the king's coming much as communities today prepare for a visit by the President or by the Pope.

In those days the roads were often in poor condition. Thus the people were expected to repair the roads so they would be smoother for the king. Often the roads had to be straightened and the hills cut down. This was what Isaiah had in mind when he wrote these words of comfort and hope for his people. The King is coming. A voice cries, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the King of Kings. Get ready for a royal visitation.”

Preparation takes time. Maybe you have done some painting at home recently. Painting itself may not take very long. What takes the time is the preparation. It is deciding what color to paint the room, going to the store to buy paint and other supplies, moving the furniture out of the room and pictures off the wall, putting down a drop cloth, putting masking tape on all the woodwork and the baseboards, around the windows and doors, filling any cracks or holes in the walls, sanding down rough spots, and getting all your rollers and edgers and brushes and paint and ladders out and ready to go. Then when you are done you have to clean the brushes, remove the tape, put away the ladders, roll up the drop cloth, and put the furniture back and things on the wall.

Preparing the way takes time and God has spent all of time to prepare the Way for us. John came to prepare the way for Jesus as had Isaiah centuries before and as have the saints of the church ever since. The Way to the Lord is ready for us. We have been given the gift of scripture, the church, the saints, and a history rich with witness and preparation.

This morning we come again to this table. A place has been prepared for us. Words have been spoken for us. A life has been given for us. A memory has been preserved for us. A tradition has been kept alive for us. A place has been set for us and for all of God's people. Some have forgotten and some have grown indifferent and some have busied themselves with other things. The place is still prepared and the invitation still offered: repent, turn around and follow the Son.